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National Agenda on the Environment and Aging  
EPA Public Listening Session  
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San Antonio, Texas

TOPIC: Aging and the Environment: Waste Disposal and Resource Recovery Issues

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I am going to speak to the issues of resource recovery, waste disposal, and aging.

Environmental health threats that affect older people include illegal dumping and improper disposal of health related wastes.

Illegal dumping of tires promotes breeding grounds for mosquitoes, which spread diseases such as the West Nile Virus found in birds and malaria. Last year the West Nile Virus spread across the U.S. Also last year for the first time in many years two cases of malaria were reported in the U.S. which were not foreign travel related.

As the population ages and home care of the elderly increases, proper disposal of sharps, bandages, diapers, and other medical wastes becomes very important. Proper disposal will protect health workers, the infirm, and family members.

Proper disposal of medication is also a concern. The usual method for medical disposal is to flush the excess down the sewer system. Recently, river water testing has shown

incidence of common drugs such as Prozac – while a number of programs emphasize not putting automotive oil into the ground and streams to keep from polluting our water, little has been said about excess medication in the water and the impact it can have on the elderly as well as the population in general.

At this point, I would like to move from discussing environmental hazards from disposal to resource recovery or recycling. The elderly do a good job when it comes to recycling if programs are available and designed for easy use. Carts with wheels for curbside pickup is best. Other areas for resource recovery in this population is the recycling of walkers, canes, hospital beds, hearing aids, etc.

New programs concerning the recycling of unopened prescription medicine could help make costly medicines available for those who can't afford them and keep the drugs out of the water. In the state of Ohio, Mr. Garry Beltz (an elderly man according to his picture) found himself with \$6700 worth of unused cancer medications for nausea and pain after his wife's death. He wanted to provide the medications to people he saw in the cancer treatment center of the hospital who needed the medications, but possibly couldn't afford them. The law said the medicines must be discarded either by being thrown in the trash or flushed down the toilet. Eventually Mr. Beltz disposed of the medicine, but he pursued a campaign to change the law. On January 6, 2003, Gov. Taft signed a law requiring the Ohio State Board of Pharmacy to establish a drug repository for pharmaceuticals that are hermetically sealed in unit-dose tamper resistant packaging. (Waste News, January, 20, 2003)

Older persons can have an important volunteer role in resource recovery. They can help educate the younger generation on reuse, recycling, and waste reduction by discussing these issues with their own grandchildren and as volunteer speakers at schools, girl scout troop meetings and so on. They can encourage others to recycle by continuing to be good role models in this activity. And they can change the laws to encourage recycling in new product areas.

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